DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 078 CS 508 941

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TITLE Building Community: When Public Relations Is Primarily an Interpersonal Experience.
PUB DATE Nov 94
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (80th, New Orleans, LA, November 19-22, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Communication Research; *Communication Skills; Group Dynamics; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; *Nonprofit Organizations; *Public Relations; Textbooks
IDENTIFIERS *Issues Management

ABSTRACT

Public relations textbooks and the literature in public relations do not discuss issues management (IM) in terms of nonprofit organizations, focusing instead primarily on corporate activity. Yet nonprofits have serious need for IM, particularly since it is the nonprofits that will be providing the leadership in diversity and multicultural efforts towards building community. Issues management is treated primarily as a "communication tool." However, communication has been narrowly defined and the discussion has not been extended to the role of interpersonal communication. In fact, interpersonal communication skills may be the key skill needed to assure that issues management is achieved. A case study of a youth chorus illustrates the key issues during the development of this nonprofit group. The case study further establishes the critical role of interpersonal skills in resolving conflict or building community in a very diverse membership. Issues management needs to be expanded beyond the definition of a "communication tool" but only after the full ramifications of the communication role is explored. Nonprofits, too, need strategic planning, monitoring processes, analysis stages. The role of interpersonal communication in all these stages is yet to be fully understood and studied in the literature. (Contains eight references.) (Author/RS)

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BUILDING COMMUNITY: WHEN PUBLIC RELATIONS IS PRIMARILY AN

INTERPERSONAL EXPERIENCE

ED 384 078

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Annual Conference
Speech Communication Association
for the panel on
"Education/Community Partnerships: International, National, Local"
November, 1994
New Orleans, Louisiana

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ABSTRACT

The public relations textbooks and the literature in public relations focuses primarily on corporate activity in terms of issues management. IM is not discussed in terms of nonprofits. Nonprofits and issues management do not seem to be two concepts which have much connection in public relations publications. Yet nonprofits do have serious need for issues management, particularly since it is the nonprofits that will be providing the leadership in diversity and multicultural efforts towards building community.

Here textbooks and the literature are examined for the approaches used in considering issues management. The primary complaint is that issues management is treated primarily as a "communication tool." However, the contention is that communication has been very narrowly defined and the discussion has not been extended to the role of interpersonal communication. In fact, interpersonal communication skills may be the key skill needed to assure that issues management is achieved. As it is recognized that issues advertising or issues publicity do not solve problems, provide insights, or aid community development, interpersonal efforts may well be the answer.

A case study of a youth chorus is outlined to illustrate the key issues during the development of this nonprofit group. It further establishes the critical role of interpersonal skills in resolving or building community in a very diverse membership.

Issues management does need to be expanded beyond the definition of a "communication tool" but only after the full ramifications of the communication role is explored. Nonprofits, too, need strategic planning, monitoring processes, analysis stages. And the role of interpersonal communication in all these stages is yet to be fully understood and studied in the literature.

BUILDING COMMUNITY: WHEN PUBLIC RELATIONS IS PRIMARILY AN

INTERPERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Community development is defined in textbooks as the contributions of organizations (usually corporate) to the community. These contributions are given because a community expects there to be participation, the appearance of contribution, a sign of stability, and ultimately pride (Seitel, 436-438). This is the traditional view of "community." In this study, building community takes on a deeper cut, a view that looks at the role of public relations, not necessarily from an organization's actions or bridging to a community. Building a community here addresses issues of particular interest to a community and from a public relations point-of-view. Public relations is viewed as the leader in community development.

There are two reasons why public relations must be viewed as primarily an interpersonal role in building community. First, the diversity of the population today demands a more sensitive and interpersonal approach. Secondly, rather than focusing on crises management, issues management should be in the forefront, actually the domain of interpersonal communication. This is appropriately summed up by Hainsworth in his statement: "few managers...would doubt the need to systematically respond to the constant, intrusive demands of an increasingly diverse, dynamic, and competitive environment" (Hainsworth, 8). The first scholars to bring issues management out of the traditional view as "public policy monitoring and analysis or merely issues communication or government relations" was with Heath and Cousino who described issues management as "a maturing discipline that offers functions and a culture that can support broad-based programs to empower public relations by making it more useful" (Heath and Cousino, 6). However, the discussion departs sharply from the previous literature at this point by not focusing on the corporate entity but instead focusing on the role of pubic relations and issues management in nonprofit organizations. Here is where the literature becomes very sparse and perhaps for many undeveloped.

Textbooks Ignore the Issues Management Function in Nonprofits. Issues management does not replace public relations but strengthens the concept. However, in the review of textbooks which is where the knowledge of public relations is codified--issues management is viewed primarily in the corporate domain. Perhaps there is a mistaken misnomer as a result of issues being attached to the word management in a "work" environment. In its most proper nuance, issues management does not mean a "management only" reference. Issues management means the process of working with issues. Therefore, nonprofits which are not top heavy with management, do indeed have a great use for the function of identifying, examining, analyzing, and communicating about issues. Let us examine how issues management is narrowly viewed by textbooks.

PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES AND TACTICS--Wilcox, Ault, Agee: The treatment of issues management is primarily as a corporate entity. The 7 pages devoted to issues management focus on its "newness" in terms of government regulation, proliferation of public, decline of the media, new technologies, the international focus, the importance

of employee communication, increased research, and the public relations practitioner being prepared for global corporate work (356-359).

THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS--Fraser Seitel--Issues management does not have its own entry but is cross-listed with crises management. Here issues management is also viewed as another way of saying counseling management. It is viewed as pre-crises planning. The discussion and the examples are from the corporate world: banking, food, oil, etc. Toward the end in the "Summary" section there is mention of the American Cancer Society, the Canadian Public Health Association and the aids campaign. None of these brief mentions focus on the incredible role of issues management in the nonprofits. The chapter ends without further discussion of the role of issue management in nonprofits (Seitel, 536-541)

PUBLIC RELATIONS AS COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT--Richard E. Crable and Steven L. Vibbert: References to issues and public policy issues but not issues management. Here the concept is linked with the role of public relations as a boundary spanner. There is neither an application of the "issues" in either the corporate or nonprofit milieu. More in a rhetorical mode here, instead, a discussion of issue types (fact, definition/category, value, policy) and their status (potential, imminent, critical, current, dormant, nonexistent) as a discussion of the life cycle of an issue (Crable and Vibbert, 61-68).

MANAGING PUBLIC RELATIONS--Grunig and Hunt: Here political issues and public issues management are the primary focus. Corporations serve as the primary examples: IBM, ALCOA, Whirlpool, etc. the discussion focuses on reactive (fighting change), accommodative (adapting to change), proactive (influencing change), and interactive (adjusting to change) (Grunig and Hunt, 296).

The treatment of issues management in the leading textbooks has definitely a corporate emphasis. In some references the issues management concept is pushed toward crises management and is perceived as a problem oriented issue. In other instances issues becomes a "public" type of concern in terms of policy. Issue management is not seen as a critical focus by an organization which may not have implications for "public" policy. In fact, issues management used here as a focus on the organizational needs (may not be problems or crises) and may be not "public" primarily but more in an interpersonal domain. Because this approach is not taken, the role of issue management in nonprofits is largely overlooked and only remotely mentioned in terms of policy development in terms of publics. It is this very omitted conceptualization that brings this discussion to focus on the role of issue management as reconceptualized to fit a nonprofit milieu. Here a case study of a regional youth chorus illustrates community development through issues management--an interpersonal emphasis in the role of public relations.

Case Study in Community Development:

The Role of Public Relations

Issues management is key to defining the role of public relations. Here issues management is more than boundary spanning, public policy and crises management. Issues management suggests strong interpersonal skills. A public relations professional with strong interpersonal skills is very effective in a nonprofit organization.

Why is issues management is of such importance to public relations? Nonprofits recognize the importance of public relations. Although the literature illustrates the PR role as more narrowly defined in terms of publicity for campaign or government relations. If there is a major commitment to building community there has to be more than

campaigns or government relations. Organizations must think about their very own makeup and character as a critical piece of building community. That their organization is part and parcel of that community.

IM Treated as a Communication Tool: Heath and Cousino summarize the treatment of IM as

> Most texts which discuss issues management treat it as a communication tool. A few emphasize its issue monitoring functions. What is largely ignored is its role in strategic planning, and corporate social responsibility

Although texts do treat issues management as a communication tool, primarily as publicity and campaigning, the entire area of interpersonal communication is largely undeveloped. Also more could be done to examine the issue monitoring function as interpersonal. Strategic planning is not fully described but most texts do examine corporate social responsibility. What is missing is the role issues management plays in building community within an organization--and this is largely an interpersonal communication function. This gap occurs primarily because nonprofits, the primary source of building community, are not discussed in terms of issues management. It is this gap, more than the perceived corporate role, which is truly the weakness of present texts. It is this gap, which is addressed in the following discussion.

CASE STUDY: Northwest Indiana Youth Chorus

Artistic groups tend to reflect primarily the elite--the financial well-off and the caucasian people or the other end of the spectrum--where everyone represents People of Color in a group, e.g., the all-black choir of Chicago, the Soul Children. The mix of races and economic diversity are not found in most groups. If building community is a critical goal for today's society, especially with the diversity of our population, then organizations should reflect this diversity, including arts organizations.

In the following case study, the Northwest Indiana Youth Chorus, the role of the public relations professional is heavily issues management. However, to achieve the issues management level largely interpersonal communication, a communication tool, is utilized. As mentioned, this brings in a rarely discussed approach to issues management and further suggests a richer development of the IM process--beyond publicity.

Strategic Planning. If strategic planning is largely missing from the discussion in textbooks, the consideration of the concept in terms of community building is even more difficult to find in the journal literature. The literature considers strategic planning primarily from a corporate viewpoint as social responsibility. Community building is not directly addressed. True, social responsibility is approached in the journal literature but for a nonprofit organization, social responsibility is only a beginning. Social responsibility takes on an added dimension for nonprofits in terms of building community. Nonprofits can serve a significant role in assisting the community building process through the boundary spanning role. For example: The NIYC Chorus is a regional chorus dedicated to the principle of bringing together young singers (age 8 through 18 years) from the representative geographic areas, racial groups (called by the newspapers as one of the most racially divided areas in the national), ethnic backgrounds, various religions, and

economic diversity. This is largely a strategic planning approach which is achieved through the public relations leadership role of boundary spanning. There has to be definite goals for each of these areas and a means for achieving these goals.

Monitoring. Constant surveillance will be necessary to assure this "mix" is sustained. Often it is the leadership that assures this. In this case there is a Board of Directors (public relations heads this group), Parents Auxiliary (supportive group), and staff (artistic staff). Initially publicity sets the tone and expectations for membership. However, what actually happens is monitored continually. Here are the "issues" that arose and the "management" response--primarily an interpersonal communication response.

RELIGION--the first issue to surface. The chorus director could not be neutral in her reference to God. She insisted that the Christians were right. Ultimately, after many attempts to work with this, she was replaced. This issue had to be monitored continually and handled primarily through interpersonal communication.

ECONOMIC--the diversity of economic groups was a source of irritation to the membership. The way people dressed and smelled became a "bone of contention." The cars one drove and the general "attitude" about mixing had to be facilitated. Again, interpersonal communication was key to handling these situations as they arose.

RACIAL--the singers have a unique behavior pattern. Having not mixed much (NW Indiana is one of the more racially divided areas in the country) the various races actually find each other interesting. If any conflicts arise it is within racial groups--Blacks arguing with Blacks, Hispanics arguing with Hispanics. So racial conflict is minimal among the singers. However, the primarily Caucasian staff which runs the Center (not the chorus) has found the different behavior patterns bothersome. Blacks tend to use more large movements and are more gregarious (loud) in talk. One would not want to change these qualities. It has taken awhile for the Center staff to adjust to the variety of people using the Center. Again, the concerns in this area were handled through interpersonal communication.

Note whereas the literature on IM applied to corporate life stresses that IM is usually applied to more practical problems such as "employee resistance to new lines of authority and other questions of effectiveness" (Nelson, 25). IM applied to nonprofit is more likely to focus on conceptual issues requiring a liberal arts background. This is another reason why the nonprofit world gives us more hope for solving the need for diversity and for understanding among people, i.e., building community.

Interpersonal Stressed. Textbooks do not stress the interpersonal skills in terms of issues management. Yet the above issues likely to arise in the NIYC organization were and will be handled through primarily interpersonal skills. Why is this important? These issues, although strategically sought after, if not monitored, could tear an organization apart. If textbooks do not include the role of interpersonal communication, then the very key issues which are important to our country in terms of community building, will not be addressed.

This is yet another model that should be present in our textbooks--the interpersonal model. IM should be expanded to cover "planning, monitoring, analyzing, and communicating." (Heath, 9) Ongoing environmental scanning is needed but not for "public" policy only. "Personal" policy here is equally important. The nonprofits have a responsibilities that are deeper then a "social" obligation. Whereas this is an area of

concern that corporate companies have not been taken seriously, those who write public relations texts (most research found in public policy literature in business schools) say an equal argument could be made for the communication literature for nonprofits ignoring issues management as a communication perspective.

There is no question that issues management in public relations should not be treated just as a communication tool. Yet it is important to recognize the communication perspective has fallen short of its goal and the role of interpersonal communication must be incorporated. Yes, research is important but if not personally understood by the people in the organization (communicated interpersonally to assured understanding) even research is worthless.

Here issues management in nonprofits looks at the responsibilities for assuring diversity through interpersonal relationships. This means that the monitoring covers the idea of understanding culture, reflecting diversity of culture in activities, and sensitivity toward differences. It is only through this approach that public relations can achieve its fullest sense of responsibility. However, nonprofits must reflect their social responsibility by building community and this appears to have a more substantial role than the corporate sense of "social responsibility." To facilitate this community building process, the role of communication must be expanded to a greater understanding of interpersonal communication. Particularly the role of interpersonal communication within nonprofit organizations. Textbooks need to reflect this perspective and the literature must equally be devoted to this approach.

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